

THE EMPTY CHAIR

This documentary was 4 years in the making, evolving in form & content hundreds of times in the edit room. The 52 minutes presented in this final version are the most compelling stories & themes:

Renny Cushing's father is shot-gunned to death yet he lobbies for victims' rights and against the death penalty.

Sue Norton's stepparents are murdered yet she is compelled not only to forgive the killer, but to forge a friendship with him.

Susan Gove Ramunda's daughter is bludgeoned to death & she advocates tirelessly to keep the death penalty a state law.

Suse & Peter Lowenstein's 21-yr. old son is bombed out of the sky over Lockerbie but they cannot forgive the terrorists.

Other voices in the documentary include **Donald Cabana**, a former death-row warden whose first hand experiences with the execution system unfold in chilling details; and a nun, **Sister Helen Prejean**, who as Spiritual advisor to inmates sentenced to die, believes that "we are all better than our worst acts."

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The Empty Chair

Four stories of murder victims' families reliving the crimes & confronting the loss of loved ones.

Their instinct for revenge & debate for punishment by death climaxes in a search to forgive and heal.

Feature Documentary
Produced & Directed by
**Jacqui Lofaro &
Victor Teich**

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Empty Chair documentary & customized discussion guides are designed to stimulate dialogue with members of civic, non-profit, faith-based and student groups, agencies in criminal and social services and professionals in legal & judicial fields.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Stories of the victims' families as recounted in the documentary bring you into an emotional relationship with the issue of the death penalty that is different from an intellectual relationship. Does it shift the debate?
2. The documentary family members express the search toward forgiveness and healing. Does this cause you to reflect on what your personal response would be to these difficult human journeys?
3. A viewer commented that the film reminded her of the doctor in Camus' *The Plague* who, without believing in God or some ultimate meaning, chose the course of sympathy, empathy and love. Does the documentary point to the spiritual (with or without god) possibilities within people?
4. The documentary deals with the human experiences regarding revenge and anger. Does this stimulate a conversation about how we can move past them?
5. Renny Cushing, whose father was murdered, says that he chooses life in prison without parole over the death penalty because once the state takes the life of the murderer it forever precludes him from the opportunity to forgive the killer. Do executions deprive the victims' families from forgiveness & reconciliation?
6. Warden Cabana, who after years of being an executioner, turns against capital punishment. Does this contradict the ideology of "the punishment fits the crime?"
7. Forgiveness does not mean you condone the crime or criminal. Forgiveness, as expressed in the film, is often chosen to save oneself. Do you view forgiveness as a choice?
8. Does the death penalty give comfort to the victims' families?
9. Are the voices of the victims' families "unheard" in the machinery of the criminal justice system today?
10. Should the statements from the victims' families have a more prominent place and role during the trial stage?
11. Many interviewees expressed distrust that "life in prison without the possibility of parole" is an absolute sentence. If it were, do you believe more people would favor it over the death penalty?
12. Has the viewing of this documentary affected your personal view of the death penalty?

If you would like to arrange for a group screening, please contact us.

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